



THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
AUGUST 23, 2020
MATTHEW 16: 13-20
"RETURN TO LOVE"

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter,^[a] and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades^[b] will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be^[c] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be^[d] loosed in heaven." Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

SERMON

Our band, *SoulSpirit*, has a process for recording our worship service. We practice each song until we feel comfortable with it and then we record that song. We follow this process with each of the four songs we play each week, then record the sermon, the children's sermon, and the prayers.

On a fairly regular basis, one of us will play a wrong note, come in at the wrong time, or make some other mistake.



When that happens, the person making the mistake owns it and says, “my fault.”

We keep score. Who makes the most mistakes at any given rehearsal and recording day?

It’s hard to admit, but I usually win with Jason coming in second.

By winning, I mean that I make the most mistakes.

Now we human beings have developed a whole list of defenses to protect against admitting we made a mistake.

We deny: “it wasn’t me.”

That’s pretty hard to do when the other members of the band have ears to hear and know how the song is supposed to sound.

But, we have many other ways to evade taking responsibility for our mistakes.

We minimize: “it wasn’t that bad.”

We rationalize: “well, I didn’t have enough time to practice and I have the hardest part, anyway.”

We can regress: “I’ll just sulk like a ten-year-old for a while until everyone feels sorry for me.”



James brown cut through all the defenses by fining his band members for playing a wrong note. No way around that one. He was the boss.

But inherent in *SoulSpirit's* approach to mistakes is an unspoken word of forgiveness.

We understand that we are practicing a song, which means we are working to learn and improve the song each time we practice it.

We understand that we are not professional musicians. We are not good enough musicians to play music for a living, so we aren't going to play perfectly. None of us can just listen to a song and play it, although frank, our drummer, likely comes the closest.

When we make a mistake, we work to not do it again. We make a correction....

At the time of Jesus, forgiveness was a ritual matter between the high priest and the people. It was a matter of corporate forgiveness for a religious community.

For instance, there was a ritual where the sins of the people of Israel were symbolically placed on a goat—the scapegoat—and sent out in to the wilderness to die--with the sins of the people on its back.

The people of Israel were thus cleansed of their sins.



A similar ritual arose in the Christian movement following the death and resurrection of Jesus, where Jesus is now seen as the scapegoated sacrifice for sins.

And through confession and forgiveness at worship, the gathered people in a congregation are cleansed of their sins.

But there is another aspect of forgiveness.

The Christian movement arose as Jesus is seen as “the new creation, the new being, the new reality which has appeared.” For this reason, he is called the Christ, whom peter recognizes in today’s gospel.

But Jesus wants to keep this identity a secret. Why?

Because the minute Jesus is revealed as the messiah, we start worshipping him instead of following him.

Don’t you see how quickly Jesus turns things back on peter?

Don’t look at me. It’s now up to you, peter, to forgive or not forgive.

And it is now up to each one of us.



Jesus is Christ because he brings this new way of being to us. In Jesus the Christ the unity of God and humanity is now a historical reality.

Human beings now participate in the divine. And one way to do this is through the act of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a deep expression of grace and love.

And in every genuine expression of love, we are dwelling in God and God is dwelling in us....

Think of forgiveness as a reset.

When someone in the band makes a mistake, we claim our fault, we return to square one, which is one of forgiveness and love. We reset and then we try it again and maybe again and again.

Forgiveness opens things back up. We let go of the error, we let go of the frustration, we go back to the beginning. This action reconnects us and closes the distance between us created by the mistake.

In this way, we see that following Christ and dwelling in God and God dwelling in us works itself out within relationship.



Forgiveness and love as divine presence is worked out in the psychological/spiritual space between us....

Forgiveness reveals three *goodnesses* simultaneously. When we forgive, we choose the goodness of the other over their faults. Any of us can become laser focused on the hurt, the problem, the difficulty created by the other. And then we forget the full humanity of the person.

Forgiveness allows us to see the person anew.

We also experience God's goodness flowing through us as we become a conduit for God as love.

And we experience our own capacity for goodness in a way that may be surprising. It is surprising, I think, when we experience ourselves as participating in divine action: forgiveness as divine love. We connect with a higher power where we can slowly deepen into living in a loving and forgiving manner....

Richard Rohr offers a compelling comment on forgiveness. He writes: "forgiveness becomes central to Jesus' teaching, because to receive reality is always to "bear it," to bear with reality for not meeting all our needs. To accept reality is to forgive reality for being what it is, almost day by day and sometimes even hour by hour. Such a practice creates patient and humble people."

I can't think of any other time in my seventy years on earth where there is a deeper need for each one of us to forgive reality for what it is.



Look at the denial all around us. Look at the minimizing all around us. See how many people have regressed to the age of toddlers, throwing public temper tantrums. See how many people issue rationalizations for their bad behavior. See how many people have literally gone off the rails, buying into conspiracy theories that are about as reasonable as thinking Elvis and Tupac are alive and well and living together in Puerto Rico.

These defenses will not heal us. These defenses will not create patient and humble people.

The definition of patient is to be able or willing to bear up under pain or trials calmly or without complaint.

Instead of being patient, some are playing the blame game. Instead of owning our mistakes, some are projecting their failings onto other people.

This is not forgiving reality because frankly, reality always wins out.

Sigmund Freud's concept of the reality principle helps us here. Our darker self seeks instant gratification of our needs, demands, and urges.

I want us to open the schools now.

I refuse to wear a mask because it infringes on my freedom.

Let's go to the bar and have a good time.

Why can't I have a graduation party?

Satisfying the darker self always leads to inappropriate actions.



Our healthy self is ruled by the reality principle. It forces us to consider the risks, requirements, and possible outcomes as we make decisions that are safe, realistic, and appropriate.

Let's establish guidelines so both our staff and students remain safe as we try to carry out education in this trying time.

I'll wear a mask because it protects other people because their lives are just as important as mine.

We'll wait until it is safe and then we'll really throw a graduation party.

And so, forgiving reality humbles us. It's sad to read about person after person who denied or minimized covid-19 and then ended up dead. That's a heavy price to pay for refusing to humble one's self to the reality principle.

When we are unable to forgive reality, we remain unable to hold reality as both good and bad. In forgiving the dark side of reality, we accept reality on its own terms.

Reality is broken. Our country is broken. Our leaders are broken. Our neighbors are broken.

Forgiveness asks us to allow God to hold the opposites—the good and the bad—together in one wholeness, in the fullness of reality.

Then it becomes possible to contain the opposites that we see in our neighbor and even those we consider our enemies.

When we can hold the opposites in a forgiven wholeness, then it is possible for our worldview and politics to change. We no longer project evil onto another country, another religion, a minority group, a race, or political party.



And we remain humble. Reality will have its way with us. To think that covid-19 is just going to disappear is to live in a fantasy world. Saying it will disappear are empty words, full of false promises.

This entire spiritual process prevents us from falling prey to fear, anger, bitterness, and hopelessness.

It's tough out there, folks, but the ancient spiritual principles allow us to open and continue to re-open our hearts to the loving presence of God among us.

SERMON SONG

The Heart of The Matter (Don Henley)